

DECOLONISING THEOLOGY AND RELIGION: DECONSTRUCTING THE SECULAR

Why should we decolonise the Theology and Religion (T&R) curriculum?

- During the colonial encounter, 'scholastic theology' (Wynter 1989:640) was used as a tool to justify colonial expansion (see Gruzinski 2001).
- After the Enlightenment, the contemporary study of religion (and especially comparative religion), finding its roots in the 19th century, is shaped by imperial and colonial discourses (see Chidester 2014)
- Decolonising the study of Theology and Religion entails acknowledging that Euro-Christianity simultaneously marginalised colonised others while presenting itself as the bearers of humanity. (Craig and An 2021:1)
- The next step is to allow the 'performative and discursive construction' of individual and collective identities using available indigenous resources, thus setting it apart from 'imposed identities and those tied to the [coloniser].' (Singh 2021:39)

What is the secular/secularism/secularity?

'Secular' – From the Latin word saeculum, meaning 'generation' or 'age'. In Christian Latin it came to signify the 'present age of the world' as opposed to an 'eternal, heavenly realm' (Bilynskyj Dunning 2017). In modern English, 'secular' literally means 'not having any connection with religion' (Cambridge Dictionary 2019).

'Secularism' – The political ideology that 'religion should not be involved with the ordinary social and political activities of a country' (Cambridge Dictionary 2019).

'Secularisation' – In the etymological sense, to secularise means 'to make worldly' (Casanova 2006:13). Casanova suggests three different meanings of secularisation: (1) as 'the decline of religious beliefs and practices in modern societies'; (2) as 'the [privatisation] of religion'; and (3) as the 'differentiation of the secular spheres [...] from religious institutions and norms' (Casanova 2006:7).

Why is studying the secular important to decolonising T&R?

- Classic theories often understand secularisation as the 'emancipation' of the 'state, economy, and science' from the Church, related to its 'etymological-historical meaning' (Casanova 2006:7).
- Within European discourses, secularisation is seen as a universal and normative process as societies advance towards modernity (see Weber 2004).
- This is problematic because concepts of the secular are intrinsically related to matrixes of power within the colonial framework as they '[arose] in early modernity with the colonial encounter' (Singh 2021:33).
- Asad argues that the secular should be seen 'as a vision of rational and therefore justified hierarchy'. (Asad 2019:15)
- In fact, the current academic setting and the study of religion are based on a secularist premise which is shaped by post-Reformation Euro-Christian assumptions of religion. This often overlooks non-Western, non-Christian religious experiences, especially those of marginalised/colonised peoples. (McGuire 2007:57-59)
- The secular maintains and reinforces existing colonial and imperial power dynamics and discourses that 'have been historically embedded in European Christianity'. (Maldonado-Torres 2008:361)
- A decolonial understanding of the secular can show the entanglement between the study of religion and colonial discourses.

How do we decolonise the study of the secular in the curriculum?

- Currently, while decolonial perspectives are included in the T&R curriculum, they are only taught in detail in specific modules in the second and third year and are otherwise only mentioned in passing or briefly acknowledged. Decolonial perspectives also rarely brought up in the first year curriculum.
- While the first year provides a foundation for more advanced knowledge, teaching the canon and deconstructing it are not mutually exclusive.
- Personally, I experienced instances of cognitive dissonance when I first started learning about decolonial perspectives, especially when it comes to concepts of the secular.
- Classic secularisation theories can be taught alongside their criticisms and decolonial theories of secularisation in the first year for a more nuanced understanding not only of the secular but of the study of religion as a whole.

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